The Silence of God as a Problem/Gift for Retrieving the Voice of the Earth in the Book of Revelation

“It is important that we are taught by silence.”

Chicura Obata

I begin with a line taken from the writings of Chicura Obata: “It is important that we are taught by silence.” These words are particularly appropriate to the goals of an ecological hermeneutic. They were written to express his experience of the voice of the natural world in visits to Yosemite National Park. The voice of the earth is often replete with messages expressed in profound and pregnant silence. In the past several years a number of papers in this section have sought to retrieve the voice of the earth from its obscurity among the clutter of other voices speaking in John’s Apocalypse. Yet, what does it mean for the voice of the earth to be recovered if God remains silent?

Direct speech from God is represented at Revelation 1:8. Many commentators then agree that God remains silent until 21:5 (10:4; 14:13; 16:1, 17 & 18:4 are possible exceptions – to be dealt with later). The picture becomes slightly more complicated when one takes into account that in the Apocalypse Jesus’ voice might be confused with God’s. There is a confusing overlap between God speaking with self-designation as “Alpha and Omega” (1:8) and the Risen Jesus’ own voice declaring he is “first and last.” (1:17) Jesus himself uses the designation “Alpha and Omega” at 22:13 further confusing their voices. Yet, even if we grant a certain pre-Trinitarian confusion in this ambiguous overlap of the Glorified Jesus’ voice with God’s Jesus too falls silent after the seven
letters. In costume as the Lamb he breaks the seven seals, presumably to “read” the scroll. Yet, we never hear his voice reading. Near the end of the book Jesus appears, again after costume change, as the white rider on a white horse. There is a picture of his voice: a sword hanging from his mouth (as in 1:16). But, no direct speech is recorded. Jesus too only breaks silence in the book’s conclusion at 22:7. From 4:2 to 21:4 as John reports what the “one like the Son of Man” has said “must take place later” (4:1c) and as the details of prophesied events unfold for us, the two voices that could authorize specific understandings of the visions fall silent precisely when we need most to hear them.

What happens in between God’s opening and closing lines is the production of a cacophony of competing voices. Many of these voices tantalizingly offer us what appear to be authoritative heavenly viewpoints for the interpretation of John’s visions. Many, like Presidential press secretaries, speak with the trappings of celestial power. We find the voices of angels and unidentified voices from heaven, from God’s heavenly Temple and, from God’s throne. There is even a Disneyesque talking altar. A rich confusion of literary voice confronts us in the Apocalypse.

For this reading it is significant that this proliferation and confusion of voice occurs in those sections of Revelation where we seek most aggressively to find the earth community speaking. And where we seek to counter the voices calling for earth’s destruction in the visions of the seven seals, seven trumpets and seven vials. When the earth’s destruction and the proliferation of heavenly voices that seemingly validate that destruction have as their backdrop the silence of God, where do we find affirmation that the voice of the earth community actually matters? Do all these ‘press secretaries’ speak authoritatively for God? God’s silence poses a potential problem for the goals of an
ecological hermeneutic when applied to Revelation. Where are we to find authoritative
validation of the earth’s voice? On first reading God’s silence could be taken to represent
negligence, lack of concern, or acquiescence to, if not down right complicity in, the
earth’s de-creation (to use Catherine Keller’s term). Or, is the silence of God actually a
gift for interpreters interested in undermining ecologically damaging readings of
Revelation?

In this paper I will examine what it means for us to retrieve the voice of the earth
against the general backdrop of the silence of God in Revelation. The method will be a
literary critical examination of the voices vying for our ears in John’s visions. I will also
blend in canonical criticism and a deconstructive reading that in Derridean fashion cross
wires the story of God speaking to Elijah in a still small voice (1 Kings 19) with the rock
concert-like high decibel story of heaven heard in John’s visions.

What is at stake is authorization of the earth’s voice when we retrieve it. In
literary criticism voice can be, and frequently is, about authorization of point of view.
Various characters, the narrator and the implied author all vie for the starring role of
authoritative voice. In a theistic symbolic universe such as John’s, God’s voice is the
supreme authorization of point of view.

The key to grasping the import of the silence of God in Revelation is, in my
view, to begin by teasing out the implications of the relationship between John as implied
author and his dual role as reporter-narrator in the story itself. An implied author uses a
narrator to provide a frame of reference for presenting a story. But not all narrators are
equal to the task and they come in many varieties: all the way from omniscient, infallible
and with God-like points of view; to, at the other end of the scale, fallible, in the dark, or
down right deceptive. Narrators can get it completely wrong. Or even seek to lead us down the wrong path. John as implied author has written himself into Revelation as a character who is the narrator. In this role he functions primarily as a reporter of what he sees and hears. John in this characterization as narrator is not omniscient and does not provide us with an infallible perspective on what he reports. This enables us to see that John as implied author does not necessarily agree with the viewpoint he expresses as narrator. This is true even if John as historical author had no such intentions.

Clearly, from the viewpoint of literary critical analysis of these texts I am interested primarily in what Paul Ricouer termed “the world in front of the text” and its relationship to the “world in the text.” This is distinguished from “the world behind the text,” that is the historical realities of its provenance, and its own independent relationship to the “world in the text.” The world behind the text, the world of the historical author, was, in the view of most historical critics, a world concerned about the sovereignty of God in contest with the sovereignty of Rome. Clearly this world can be tied very neatly to the world portrayed in the text. As Stephen Moore argued some time ago, the concern with divine omnipotence led the historical author to replace the sovereign oppression of Rome with the sovereign oppression of God. But using Ricouer’s differentiations, can we find in the text’s surplus of meaning a different focus for those of us who stand in front of these texts seeking to re-examine the most negative implications in interpretation? If the focus of the world behind the text on the sovereignty of God is determinative for our readings in front of the text it would appear that this is a book that, in the method of ecological hermeneutics, we may have to
acknowledge is irredeemable. Who will save us from this book of destruction and validate the earth’s voice?

Luckily, John assists us by writing himself into the story as narrator. Revelation opens with the John writing to us in direct voice as the implied author. Such a move on the part of an author is a way of providing an authoritative framing. In these opening verses the implied author frames the book as about the future (v. 1), expresses concern that his work is read (v. 3), greets his audience (vv. 4 – 6) and reports direct speech from God (v. 8) as a means of giving this authorial introduction still more clout. In verse 9, with a shift to historical past tense, John begins to transform from implied author to a character in the story. The transformation is complete by v. 10. The implied author uses himself to tell a story about himself. This distances the voice of the implied author and the voice of the narrator. In short, John as narrator does not carry the same authority as John the implied author.

As narrator John fails to instill trust that all he reports is God’s will for the earth. My doubts about the narrator’s skills as a reporter do not encompass his eyesight. His vision seems to be good. Nowhere does the implied author hint that the narrator suffers from myopia. There are no passages indicating that the narrator needs clarification of what he sees. Sometimes he lacks language to express adequately what he sees, but he never sees “through a glass darkly.” What I doubt is his hearing.

John the implied author has no confusion about God’s voice. God speaks in a non-problematic, straightforward manner in 1:8. John as narrator becomes confused about the whole issue of voice. Just who exactly is speaking to him? In the initial vision of one like the Son of Man John first hears an unidentifiable voice. Only turning to look
clarifies who is speaking (v. 12). It remains clear that this voice speaks in the dictation of the seven letters. But beginning at 4:1 heavenly voices begin to become confused for the narrator. It is the “first” voice, no longer clearly identified as “one like the Son of Man,” that the narrator reports speaking. From this point on voices from heaven become hopelessly confused for the narrator. He can only identify them as “from heaven” (10:4, 14:13) or “from the heavenly temple (16:1, 17), or vaguely “from the throne” (16:17). They are all “a” voice, not “the” voice, leaving us in the dark as to whether or not we are hearing the same heavenly authorization or a sequence of differing voices. This is confirmed in the confusion over “another voice” from heaven in 18:4. Is this a new voice distinguished from a previous single voice from heaven or does it signal that this is yet another voice in a long line of different voices emanating from heaven? Does John the narrator have any real clue just who it is he hears?

In the narrative development of the plot these heavenly voices seem to provide authoritative viewpoints on the meaning of it all. But, should we equate heavenly voice with authoritative interpretative framework? Again, I doubt that the narrator’s reporting is adequate to make such an assumption. My doubts arise from his displays of ignorance, confusion and secrecy. The narrator’s most serious failure is to misunderstand the most central messages he has reported.

Ignorance: The narrator cannot identify the multitude in white robes (7:13-14). He is ignorant of Jesus’ secret name in spite of seeing it (19:12). Confusion: The ‘mystery’ of the Woman seated on the Beasts leaves him befuddled (θαυμαζω - 17:6-7). This even though the identity of the Woman and her relationship to the Beast is utterly central to the plot and issues of the visions. The subsequent revealing of the mystery tells
us this is something the implied author understands, but about which he has chosen to leave himself as narrator in the dark. The implied author’s move to have an angel explain the mystery undermines the credibility of his narrator. The subsequent unpacking does not undo the narrator’s initial failure to comprehend. John as narrator is also undermined in his abilities when he requires instruction by angels (11:1); and is on purpose displayed as limited in authority when told not to write down the voice of the thunders (10:4). And this is not the only place where he keeps secrets. The number of the beast is almost certainly a thing about which both the historical and implied authors have views, yet the narrator will not, or is unable to divulge those secrets (13:18). These issues with John’s reporting might be seen as quibbles. It is his failure to comprehend one of the central messages of Revelation that most seriously undermines his credibility in reporting.

The most damning subversion of our trust in the narrator occurs in a doublet as the visions build toward their climatic revelation of God’s new order. Just at the point where the plot moves toward climax and one would expect that the implied author wants to leave us with complete confidence in the reporting abilities of his narrator the narrator fails us. Not once, but twice the narrator commits the gravest of all possible errors in Revelation. He falls down and, on the verge of idolatry, attempts to worship an angel (19:10 and 22:8). One wonders if the narrator has been paying attention anything he has seen and reported. If the narrator has missed this most central of all lessons in Revelation – only God and the Lamb are worthy of worship – one wonders what else he has failed to understand. As a narrator who fails to comprehend the very lessons the implied author is trying to instill, where else has he been less than astute in implying the meaning of the visions? Is everything spouting from heavenly sound sources and so noisily reported as
fixed in divine sovereignty actually the case? I mistrust the narrator’s interpretive contexts for heavenly voices. This mistrust extends to the sound levels the narrator tells us many of these voices produce.

Christopher Frilingos has recently argued that an essential backdrop for understanding Revelation is the Roman Empire’s practice of producing spectacles: visually awe inspiring productions of beasts, fantastic sets, triumphal processions, fabricated drama and combat all displayed the “spectacle of Empire.” It is a sort of conspicuous consumption of power indicators. In Frilingos’ view John displays a counter spectacle of the Lamb.

An aspect of spectacle I see as underplayed by Frilingos is sound. The roar of the coliseums, the orchestrated noise of the crowds, trumpets and drums, the tramp of the hobnailed boots of whole legions, all contributed to aural as well as visual spectacle.

Harry Maier’s perennially useful interpretation of Revelation devotes a chapter to the noise of John’s visions. Consistent with period expectations John imagines heaven as deafeningly loud. Overpowering voices are likened to thunder and trumpets, described as loud and great. Numberless choristers sing praises in triple forte. The decibels are sometimes high enough to shake the foundations of heaven and earth. What are we to make of all this noise?

John, both as narrator and implied author (who is ultimately in control), seems to want us to hear majesty and authority in all this noise. This is bad news for the voices of the earth community if the decibels with which their destruction is proclaimed translate into divine majesty and omnipotence authorizing that destruction. How can the innocent
earth speak against the noise of heaven as it rushes to judgment? Can we cross-wire and short out heaven’s sound system?

In another time and another place the noise of ideological conflict between God and the power of those opposed to God led another prophet to imagine that God would speak with deafening decibels. Leading into 1 Kings 19 Elijah has been noisily protesting against royal promotion of the Baal cult. Early in the chapter he is driven by the noise of Jezebel’s death threats to flee into the wilderness. Feeling alone, defeated and convinced of the ultimate failure of God’s cause Elijah turns suicidal. Yet the “word of the Lord” comes to him. And Elijah is promised an encounter with God. The text implies that Elijah expects this encounter to be awe inspiring as the Lord “passes by.”

The train of a passing king or emperor brought expectations of loud noise of acclamation, spectacle displays of power and authority. Elijah expects the Lord passing by to equal or excel the displays and decibels of mere human kings. God seems to feel it necessary to reverse Elijah’s assumptions about divine noise. But first, playing to Elijah’s preconceptions God first sends a great and powerful wind. The overpowering roar of a tornado comes to my aural memory. Awe inspiring, indeed. The wind produces a noise of acclamation Elijah must assume is worthy to accompany God. But the Lord was not accompanied by the shriek of the wind. Tramping armies and great engines of war accompany kings and shake the earth. Surely the Lord in passing by will make the very earth groan and shout out in the noise of an earthquake. But the rumble of grinding tectonic plates did not reveal God. A small fire is comforting in its crackle. A forest fire or brush fire racing up a mountain side – such as Horeb where Elijah is hiding – produces a terrifying deafening roar as it consumes all in its path. The power of kings and
emperors is to consume, in conflagration if desired, any who stand in their way. The King of the Universe will surely be accompanied by the noise of conflagration. No. Inverting all of Elijah’s expectations for the noise of a divine train, the Lord comes in a “gentle whisper” (NIV). The Hebrew roots carry connotations of an emaciated, shrunken, starving voice, a nearly inaudible croak. The NRSV renders it, perhaps overplayed, as “a sound of sheer silence.”

Cross wiring this story with Revelation is appropriate. Elijah has long been thought to make a cameo appearance in chapter 11 as one of the two witnesses (the other often thought to be Moses). The confirmation of his appearance may be supported in v. 6 where it is said the two witnesses can cause drought. It seems that Elijah’s meteorological skills are still in play. (However, I must acknowledge that, as with all interpretive puzzles in Revelation, there is no consensus on this point and other identities have been put forward for these witnesses.) Now what sorts of sparks fly off when we cross the wires?

For all of John’s concern with noise, designating noise, describing the ear splitting, overpowering levels of noise and the heavenly origins of all this rumbling powerful vibration, at two key points he slips up and reveals the cards he has hidden up his sleeve. John, as implied author, it seems, had learned something from Elijah. God is not found in great noise, even great heavenly noise. When God’s mouth first opens in Revelation (1:8) there is no adjective used to measure the decibels. God speaks in a still (?), small (?), at least normal, voice. The smallness of God’s voice in 1:8 is accentuated by the description of the Risen Jesus’ voice as “great” and “like a trumpet” in v. 10b. The same God who spoke to Elijah speaks in the opening of Revelation. The gentleness,
stillness and smallness, the near inaudibility, of God’s whispering voice frames The Apocalypse in its beginning. What is most significant is that loud noise is not an issue for the implied author framing the work. Loud noises from heaven only become a feature of the story at the point of transition of direct representation of the implied author to John as narrator inside the story.

And chapter 21 confirms that God – in contradistinction to noisy heavenly busybodies – speaks in weakened whisper, or at least a very quiet voice. The new heaven and the new earth have come into being. The New Jerusalem descends from the new heaven to rest on the new earth. And a “great” voice speaks from God’s throne. The clear distinction between this large, noisy voice and God’s is made clear in v. 5 which distinguishes the voice ‘out of’ (εκ) the throne from the voice of the one seated on the throne.

It is important to relate at this point that the contrast settles the dispute as to whether or not the unidentified heavenly and throne voices in Revelation are God’s voice, as some commentators insist (confusing heaven with God?). First, if other voices than God’s can come from God’s throne, other voices can come from the heavenly Temple. And the previous voice from the throne cannot be God’s or it would be designated as the voice of the one on the throne. Second, when it is clear that God speaks, God speaks in the first person (1:8, 21:5). The unidentified heavenly and throne voices speak of God in third person. [The voice in 18:4 is an exception with its curious “my people” (v. 4b) immediately shifting to third person reference to God in the remainder of the poem (vv. 5b and 8b) Is this another indicator of the narrator’s confusion about voice?] No, God remains silent in the visions of Revelation until 21:5.
Or, is God just speaking so softly that the divine voice is drowned out by the noise of other voices trying to convince us that God acts in omnipotent sovereignty over the earth? After the last “great” voice has spoken, and the noise has finally calmed down, God and Jesus regain their authoritative voices. God speaks clearly and quietly. There is no designation of it being a “great” voice. Elijah, in his cameo appearance knows that God speaks in a gentle whisper, not in the noisy accoutrements of power. Now John knows as well.

This point needs to be underscored. The last designation of decibels and voices is made in 21:3. Then God speaks with no noise level indication and none are reported for any remaining voices to the close of the book. The implied author is beginning an extended transition back to direct speech. The transition is completed in 22:8-10, vv. 8 & 9 mixed between the narrator’s voice and that of the implied author with the implied author in control from 22:10 onward. As the narrator’s role draws to a close the obsession with noise ends and God speaks – all heavenly characters speak – in still small voices.

And what does God say? “Behold I am making (ποιω) all things new” (21:5), “It has been and continues to be” (γέγοναν 21:6). The present and perfect tense verbs gently and quietly crash in upon us, undoing everything the narrator has put forward to this point. The narrator, reporting “great” noisy voices, encouraged us not to notice the present, or what has been and continues to be, but to fast-forward into the future. The narrator tells us “great” voices commanded him to write “what will take place later” (1:19c), “what must take place after this” (4:1c). But should we believe him? Now we
find that this narrated emphasis on what will happen is *quietly* undone by what IS happening.

The implied author has not prepared us for this. It is a surprise. Historical authors report that they are sometimes surprised by the actions of characters in their stories. Implied authors offer more give and take than historical authors in our interpretation of them. And so I suggest that John as implied author here in chapter 21 experiences something like a surprising Freudian slip. His narrator seems to undergo a subconscious inversion of his interest in the future. Can we imagine that the implied author is surprised at what he has just caused his narrator to report? Is Elijah looking over his shoulder as he writes saying, “See, I’ve been trying to tell you . . ..”? In the end, none of this is about the future at all. It is not about what God will do. It is about what God IS doing. It is not about noise, it is about God’s pregnant silence. John’s visions are less about what will be done in the future, than about what God has completed now, already. The still small voice, unaccompanied by the noise of heavenly expectations, speaks quietly not of *then*, but of *now*.

And just what, exactly, IS God doing? I have been fascinated by the difference in God’s silence between the biblical canon’s first chapter and its last book. In the opening chapter of Genesis God is quite vocal. God’s voice creates, and what God’s voice creates is said to be good. What God is doing in Genesis is verbal creation, voice becoming reality. And God seems to like talking about it. God’s silence in Revelation stands in stark contrast.

God talks in Genesis 1. God talks without decibel descriptors. Is God practicing to speak to Elijah in a gentle whisper? Perhaps, but first and foremost God speaks to
create and affirm creation. God as a speaking character in the creation story likes what is being made. The Maker and the Made are both affirmed, in fulfilling mutuality, in openness to one another. Thus the omnipotent Priestly narrator provides validation of creation.

In contrast Revelation at first reading seems to undermine the relationship between the Maker and the Made. Catherine Keller has spoken of Revelation as containing a story of de-creation, a sort of anti-Genesis. Loud noisy voices shout about and try to affirm the destruction of creation. But they are bracketed by God’s still small voice. And with the breaking of the seventh seal, very nearly midway through the visions, the seventh seal, encompassing and containing and delimiting the remaining seven trumpets and vials, the sound of sheer silence dominates heaven.

What are we to make of this curious sheer silence, so oddly intruding upon the general calamitous noise of heaven? Comment on the meaning of heaven’s silence is diverse, signaling literary indeterminacy. Is the silence meant to aid God in listening to the prayers of the martyrs? I did not know that God was hard of hearing. Is it a silence mimicking the silence that lies so impenetrably in front of Genesis 1:1? God broke that silence to speak creation. Is God ready now to speak out of silence for re-creation? But re-creation is still more than a dozen chapters away. Literary connections are not readily apparent. And the new heaven and new earth appear with a noisy announcement (21:3). God’s silence follows and does not presage their appearance. Is it a liturgical silence preparing for prayer? Whose prayers? The long list of unsatisfying interpretive options drives us back to the indeterminacy of the text and the pregnancy of silence, God’s silent, still, small voice. Tying this unexpected intrusion of silence in the middle of Revelation
to the nearly silent voice of God framing the book as whole places this middling heavenly silence in a new perspective. Each concluding seven; either seal, trumpet, or vial; in the convoluted weaving forward and backward of time in Revelation brings us to the fullness of the end and then, of course, back again. In a sense each seventh contains the whole. And the first, the seventh seal, contains the whole of the whole by holding within itself all seven trumpets and vials. Often this completeness of the whole within the seventh is taken to mean a confirmation of the visions. But by tying this silence in heaven to God’s nearly silent voice at the beginning and ending of the book, this pregnant half hour is not God’s imprimatur for destruction. This silence in its pregnancy speaks, rather, of a countermanding of destruction: a refusal of God to condone the earth’s demolition. This half hour of silence is again a Freudian slip by the implied author as God’s interest in renewal, now, seeks to break out and silence the voices calling for future destruction, even here in the heart of a noisy plot line.

Silence and God’s nearly silent voice affirm renewal of creation. Lest one think I am neglecting chapter 22 the Spirit (and the bride), again in pre-Trinitarian confusion (?), command (present tense) that we “come,” now and that we “drink” now the water of life the narrator has just said will be flowing in the future river of life (22:17). All these present tense imperatives pull the future city of God and its life giving river into a time warp in which it is now rather than then. And the voices of chapter 22 are, again, quiet whispers lacking sound level descriptors.

The still small voice of God and God’s own insistence on speaking in present tense stands the futurist concerns of Revelation on their head. God’s small voice speaks authoritatively not about destruction, but about present tense renewal of all things
(παντα). Cross wired with Genesis’ Priestly narrator, John can be seen to come into line with a canonical consistency. God said, “Let it be.” John reports God’s interest now as “Let it be renewed – now, in the present.” Creation and the affirmation of creation, Maker and Made in union, has been God’s interest all along. Noise has simply been drowning out this message so gently whispered behind the scenes of Revelation’s visions. It is not so much that the noise invalidates what the narrator sees, but it certainly invalidates the implications the narrator provides for the meaning of what is seen. In the final act God’s voice countermands reports of divine participation in de-creation and affirms, instead, renewal of creation. The entire plot of Revelation turns on its head, the climax is other than expected. We are forced to go back and rework everything we thought we understood in light of this closing speech in authoritative voice.

This is good news for those of us seeking to use an ecological hermeneutic in Revelation. When we retrieve the voices of the earth community from these visions they stand affirmed as they were in the original creation. The voices of the earth community receive a metaphysical anchor when we “are taught by silence;” when we find the earth’s voice speaking with accents of renewal and re-creation. It is precisely in interpretations that invert destruction and deny it finality where we find God’s voice and the earth’s voice, Maker and Made, singing the same song of renewal. In pianissimo.